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September 7, 2011 5:00 pm

The story-teller with a wealth of raw material

By Dina Medland

The headmaster who gave the young Kenneth Olisa an early taste of caviar succeeded in banishing any feelings of exclusion the black schoolboy might have had growing up in Nottingham in the 1950s.

Today, the highly approachable Ken Olisa, OBE, has a string of achievements to his name: chairman of London's boutique technology merchant bank Restoration Partners; the first British-born black man to serve on the board of a large UK public company; the first non-executive director to be spectacularly ousted from the board of a FTSE-100 company; and many more.

He generously attributes this high-flying career to kindnesses done to him by others – such as the headmaster at his first local state school who made an indelible impression on him: “He was determined his pupils would never feel excluded and he got out a jar of caviar and gave a small dollop on a cracker to every child, saying ‘you must never feel you have never tasted it’,” he says.

At his next school, a very different headmaster, who encouraged conflict, sowed the seeds for the independent thought and plain speaking for which Mr Olisa is now known.

He founded an “underground” magazine there, became head boy and, when required to deliver a speech at the end of the final term, decided at the last minute to ignore the approved text. “I remember feeling this immense tension and then a huge beaming of support from behind me,” recalls Mr Olisa, as he enjoyed his first taste of public speaking.

Leaving school, he says he “did not want to do anything in particular” and once applied to be a bus conductor. Instead, he studied at Cambridge University and won an IBM scholarship.

Working with IBM as an intern between the first and second year at Cambridge was “unbelievably exciting, writing computer programs, flying first class everywhere and learning from what was then a beacon of liberal American business behaviour”.

He went on to join IBM and held posts in systems engineering before moving to sales and marketing. This direction was consolidated with a move to Wang Laboratories in 1981, where he became general manager of Wang Europe, Middle East and Africa. Leading the

team which restored the operation to profitability, he led an unsuccessful management buy-out – and lost his job when it failed. Being fired was “a horrible experience”, he says.

Mr Olisa is a master story-teller and appears never to have been short of initiative, enthusiasm or a sense of humour. His stories reveal he has always been a quick learner, both intellectually and emotionally, perhaps partly due to being the son of an English mother and Nigerian father. He says he “cannot imagine what it was like for them”. The marriage ended in divorce and he was brought up by his mother.

His background certainly helped him become an extremely successful salesman. “It was definitely an advantage, taking clients by surprise. When I spoke to them on the telephone, they were never expecting a black man at the door later.”

After the MBO at Wang failed, he bounced back by founding Interregnum, a technology merchant bank: “Dun & Bradstreet software had offered me a job to be head of Europe in an ‘international businessman’ mould. But the devil that sits on my shoulder said ‘so you’re going to spend the rest of your life working for great companies someone else has created’.” Interregnum went on to a £100m initial public offering on AIM, the junior market, in 2000.

He has served on the boards of several technology companies, remains a director of Thomson Reuters, and is a senior board member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, the House of Commons anti-sleaze watchdog. And last year he became master of The Information Technologists livery company.

Mr Olisa is also chairman of Thames Reach, a charity working to shelter and resettle the homeless in London, and was awarded his OBE in 2010 for service to the homeless.

He says he has learnt over the years that so much of the story of how people progress is about self-esteem. Someone who is homeless, he says, has “suffered a catastrophic loss of self-esteem” and must be helped to rekindle that.

Typically, his experiences as a non-executive director have been swashbuckling – from winning an award to being ousted this year from the board of the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation (ENRC). Having described the board as “more Soviet than City”, he jokes that he is going to make sure “the ousting goes into the Guinness Book of Records”.

Turning more serious, he adds: “Non-executive directors are crucially important. Where it used to be about the balance between an executive and a non-executive, it’s increasingly clear that the triangle has to be in balance – executives, non-executives, and shareholders.”

Mr Olisa sees himself today as businessman and philanthropist, having also become chair of the Powerlist Foundation, a new charity aiming to promote the development of young people up to the age of 25 in achieving their full potential. Its first summer school this year aimed to offer young people “the kind of support public school kids get every day”, he says.

But his own acknowledgement of the importance of acting as a role model to others is relatively recent. For years, he resisted joining the “black and ethnic network” at Thomson Reuters – but when he did, he found such networks can be a powerful means of change.

Secret CV

- My big break?

Getting into Cambridge. It exploded my mind into so many new experiences. It was a formative time in the right environment.

- Person who made a difference

Norman Knight. I met him in 1986 on a flight – we were sitting next to each other and he ignored me until I insisted we talk to each other. He made a lot of money in broadcasting, and has been giving it away ever since, as president and co-founder of the 100 Club of Massachusetts. We have remained friends, and he has taught me that society is our most important asset as human beings and to influence it you must make a contribution.

- Best career advice to others?

It's about being able to see when you're being offered a real opportunity. Avoid the "curse of rational incrementalism". Work out where you would like to get to in a period of time and then plan the next steps.